



Students from across central Idaho attended a career fair and participated in activities aimed at encouraging them to pursue higher education and technical careers.

Opportunity knocks: Technical career expo targets rural Idaho students

by [Ethan Huffman](#), INL Communications & Public Affairs

Dotted along the base of the Bitterroot Range and within a stone's throw of the Lemhi River lie several quaint and sparsely populated communities. From Tendoy to Leadore, these quiet towns, just a few miles north of Idaho National Laboratory, offer residents a peaceful serenity characteristic of central Idaho.

But for hundreds of area junior high and high school students, the rural environment can be a limiting factor when it comes to learning about higher education and pursuing technical careers. It also affects local businesses that today need a constant supply of highly-trained employees to perform increasingly complex jobs.



"It seemed like a perfect fit for INL to get behind this event and support it fully," said Ray Barnes, of INL's regional partnerships office. "We're going to need these students in a few years to continue our energy security mission." [View video from the Salmon Career Expo.](#)

In a phenomenon taking place across the country, many school districts and businesses, grappling with the economic recession, are reducing spending and outreach at a time when it's most significant for long-term economic prosperity. Some economists have referred to this juxtaposition as the cycle of retrenchment. But in a handful of nearby communities, tomorrow's work force has been given the opportunity to flourish thanks in part of a group of concerned business leaders.



A junior high student sits inside a National Guard Blackhawk helicopter during the Salmon Career Expo.

Last year, sensing a need to inject opportunity back into small Idaho communities, Doug Sayer, the CEO of Blackfoot-based Premier Technology, established the Rural Idaho Outreach Partners (RIOP). Sayer teamed up with INL, the [Idaho Department of Labor](#), the Lemhi Economic Development Association and several local businesses and citizens to establish a program aimed at stimulating economic growth, creating high-paying jobs and building a strong, skilled work force that can thrive in rural Idaho.

In 2008, the RIOP organized an inaugural Career Expo at Salmon High School and invited students from across the region to meet with university recruiters and business leaders. The expo provided students an opportunity to explore potential careers ranging from science and engineering to manufacturing and fabrication. The event proved to be a success, drawing hundreds of current and former students from several districts.

"We wanted to create an event for the students in these communities to find information about higher education and potential careers because many times they don't have access to it any other way," said Merry Logan, manager of the Department of Labor's Salmon office.

Last week, the RIOP returned to Salmon and upped the ante for the second annual Career Expo. Following the success of the previous year's event, the expo was moved to the Lemhi County Fairgrounds to provide more space for exhibits, displays and students. Once again, the event proved to be successful as the population in the tiny town of Salmon swelled by more than 1,000 people. This year, students, parents and teachers from across the region and two states (Idaho and Wyoming) converged on the fairgrounds for a full day of learning, exploration and competition.

"It's been amazing to see the turnout this year from both the schools and the businesses who want to participate and want to see these students succeed," said Logan. "If it sparks their interest in getting an education and pursuing a new career, then maybe they'll be encouraged to bring that skill back to the area."

Local professionals ranging from electricians to veterinarians joined recruiters from seven colleges, including [Idaho State University](#), the [College of Southern Idaho](#) and the [ITT Technical Institute](#). [The National Guard](#) thundered into

town, landing Apache and Blackhawk helicopters outside the exhibit hall while the [U.S. Forest Service](#) demonstrated aerial rappelling from two wildland firefighting helicopters.

Volunteer emergency service members displayed a handful of specialized emergency medical vehicles, while heavy equipment operators from Robert Stoddard Construction and the Lemhi County Road and Bridge Department demonstrated how machinery and mathematics are used to level and grade a parking lot and pour concrete. Dozens of other businesses lined the exhibit hall for the chance to speak to students about career and trade opportunities in a wide range of fields.

In addition to the demonstrations and exhibits, students from area high schools were challenged by the RIOP to build and demonstrate a trebuchet. These medieval-era machines are similar in structure to a catapult, but use counterweights to demonstrate the science behind potential and kinetic energy. Four student teams from Salmon, Mackay, Leadore and one home school each developed original trebuchet systems for under \$250 apiece and demonstrated them before a large crowd of cheering onlookers.



Students from Mackay High School prepare to launch a water balloon from a catapult they designed.



A soldier from the U.S. Army directs students to his exhibit at the career fair.

Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna and several other state dignitaries watched the competition and were on hand as Salmon narrowly defeated Mackay by launching a water balloon 90 feet. For its efforts, the winning team was awarded \$5,000 by Premier Technology.

Later in the afternoon, INL and Premier showcased their engineering skills by unveiling two massive trebuchets capable of throwing 3-pound weights at least 300 hundred yards. The engineering challenge and demonstration capped off an exciting day and as the students returned to the classroom, many were already making plans to attend next year's expo.

Just a week before the event, organizers were hoping 700 students and about 30 exhibitors would be in attendance. At day's end, nearly a thousand students and four dozen businesses came out to support the students that will make up tomorrow's work force.

"I think the kids in this area have a real chance to go places, but they need to get the experience and education that will make them competitive," said retired math teacher Barbara Miller. "It's the well-trained people that do the best in today's world."

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